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# Bad Language in Reality

-A study of swear words, expletives and gender in reality  
television

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## Abstract

**Title:** Bad Language in Reality – A study of swear words, expletives and gender in reality television

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**Abstract:** This essay is a study on swearing in modern English on television from a sociolinguistic point of view, taking into account the effect that variables such as nationality, social class and gender might have on the expletive usage in the examined material. After a general discussion of expletives and their functions, the question of whether there is a relationship between gender and the use of expletives is addressed. A review of previous research on the subject suggests a difference in opinion between traditional sociolinguistic studies, in which the differences between male and female speech have often been highlighted, and where female speech has been characterized as more polite, aiming for standard language and avoiding expletives, while modern feminist critics argue that these are stereotypes perpetuated through the ages which have little support of empirical evidence. The second half of the paper reports the results from an investigation on the use of expletives in two reality television programs with the same basic features; one American – *Jersey Shore*, and one British – *Geordie Shore*. The results of this investigation seem to contradict the stereotypical notions of women as less prone to use expletives than men. Possible reasons for this, including group identity and social class, are discussed.

**Keywords:** Swearing, swear words, expletives, covert prestige, gender, reality television

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# 1. Introduction

Swearing is an interesting aspect of language, one that involves both emotional and linguistic expression. It exists in most people's repertoire, but is also accompanied by a certain degree of taboo. Unlike language in general, swearing is not typically taught by authority figures in the usual sense (parents, school), but is rather picked up from peers or figures with a different kind of authority (for example idols in sports or show business). To most people, swearing has negative connotations and is seen as bad language; something ugly, not appropriate, and is associated with low social class and low prestige. Despite this, some researchers suggest that swearing has an important role in children's cognitive and social development and therefore should be encouraged within the right contexts (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992). Swear words and the act of swearing have long been the objects of research within a variety of disciplines including linguistics, neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics and developmental psychology, sexuality, education, history, sociology, social psychology, women's studies and nursing (Thelwall, 2008:84; Crystal, 2003:364), which tells us that an analysis of swearing can provide insights on many levels. Linguistic studies on the subject have nonetheless been infrequent, and the pioneers within this field were often met with the attitude that swearing and bad language do not belong in academic studies. Other problems working against swearing as an object of study is that expletives are typically found in spoken language, and are far less common in written language for social and functional reasons. Such a study has been difficult in the past, due to the absence of corpus resources, but the production of the British National Corpus (BNC) has facilitated studies of this kind, which can be seen in, for example, research projects like that by McEnery and Xiao (2004).

How frequently one swears and how strong swear words one uses are habits strongly tied to gender roles and culture. The expressions that are used in swearing involve elements that are in some way taboo or stigmatized, and studying swearing can teach us something about values and expectations in society. Swearing has often been pointed out in previous studies as something that distinguishes male speech from female speech, in that male speakers use more and stronger swear words (McEnery, 2005). However, recent feminist criticism has suggested that the majority of these studies lack empirical evidence for their claims, or appear to highlight the differences for the sake of keeping in line with the common dichotomy of inherent differences between the sexes (Hughes, 1992, de Klerk, 1991, Stapleton, 2003). Since swearing traditionally has been seen as something manly and tough, men have also been said to be unique in earning a positive response to their expletive usage; something

sociolinguists call *covert prestige*, which I will discuss in more detail in section 2.1. Especially among members of the working class, swearing could sometimes be demanded of people wishing to show their solidarity and sense of belonging to this group. Some researchers have suggested that the concept of earning *covert prestige* from swearing also includes women to a certain degree, especially in some specific groups (Trudgill, 1972 in Hughes, 1992). As an example, the informants of Hughes' study (1992) on a group of working class women seem to fit this description.

In this essay I take a closer look at swearing in two reality television shows, taking into account the effect that variables such as nationality, social class and gender might have on the expletive usage in the examined material. I use the cover term *expletive* to refer to taboo or swear words in general and alternate between the terms expletive and swear word, which are regarded as synonyms throughout this essay.

## **1.1 Aim and scope**

The aim and scope of this study is to give an account of expletives occurring in two reality television programmes and if possible to find answers to the following questions:

What types of swearing are represented? What areas of taboo and word classes do the different expletives used belong to, and in what situations are expletives prevalent? Is there a difference in expletive usage between male and female speakers? What differences can be seen between British and American speakers in their choice and use of expletives? What influence does the medium of television have on the speech choices of the participants? And finally, can any conclusions about gendered swearing in these two nationalities be drawn from the results?

## **1.2 Defining expletives**

Andersson and Trudgill (1992) have defined swearing as “a type of language use in which the expression (a) refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatized in the culture; (b) should not be interpreted literally; (c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes”. The word *shit* can be used as a representative example; it literally refers to a tabooed item, excrement. However, when the word is used for swearing, the literal and referential meaning is lost. Instead it is used in an emotive sense, to express feeling and attitudes (1992:53). Thus, words have to be used in a figurative sense, and include taboo elements, to be classified as swear words. They are emotive formulas which get their meaning from their generally

accepted status as, precisely, formulas and not “normal language”. This is also what makes many words and expressions interchangeable as expletives; they convey a general emotive code (Ljung, 1984:23ff, 36).

Swearwords belong in the area of linguistic taboo, but as they form part of a continuum, they are not always easily distinguishable from slang. It is particularly hard to differentiate between mild swearing and slang when the latter is used in an abusive context. Crystal (2003) draws a distinction between the language of taboo, the language of abuse (*invective*) and the language of swearing, though the three may overlap or coincide: “obscurity, which involves the expression of indecent sexuality – ‘dirty’ or ‘rude’ words; blasphemy, which shows contempt or lack of reverence specifically towards God or gods; and profanity, which has a wider range, including irrelevant reference to holy things or people”. Furthermore, Crystal underlines that the term swearing often is used as a “general label for all kinds of ‘foul-mouthed’ language, whatever its purpose” (2003:173).

Swearing can be used to show strong emotions, but it does not have to be “emotional”. Swearing has important social functions that seem as important as the aggressive one, such as being an identity marker and to show either social distance or social solidarity. Swearing can also be used for its shock value or to create a certain stylistic effect. Emotional swearing is often instinctive, as a reaction to annoyance or stress of some sort, such as when pain is inflicted or a strong reaction of anger or disappointment is provoked. In these situations it has actually been shown that swearing can have a stress reducing, and even pain reducing, function (Crystal, 2003:173). In other cases, where the speaker has more control over the situation and is not solely acting out of instinct, swear words can range from being emotive constructions to purely stylistic expressions (Ljung, 1984:12).

Whether intended or coincidental, swear words convey a certain stylistic effect, the impact of which can be very different depending on the hearers and situation (Ljung, 1984:18). Expletives vary in force from very mild to very strong, their likeliness to cause offence being subject to variables such as context, levels of formality, relationships, age, culture and social class. The class aspect of swearing is highlighted by McEnery while loosely defining swearing as the use of a word or phrase which is likely to cause offence when it is used in “middle class polite conversation” (2005:2). The perceived strength of an expletive is determined by the intensity of the taboo associated with it. What is seen as taboo differs with the above mentioned variables, and expletives are subject to inflation; overuse tends to diminish their effect, and their likeliness to cause offence tends to decrease over time as new words gradually take their place. As an example, religious swear words have gone from very

strong to mild in our present day secularized western societies. Still, the most typical forms of swearing in English involve blasphemic utterances, bodily functions, and sex. This can be explained by the fact that it has long been considered taboo to profane religious matters and that sex and excretion have been seen as unmentionable, especially in western societies (Ljung, 1984:25-29; 2006:38).

Expletives are realized by taboo words or by euphemisms for such; a word or expression that is milder or less direct than the intended term. There is a set of “standard” euphemisms for most known swearwords, and a plenitude of more or less creative alternatives. Previous research has often shown that female speakers use more euphemisms for expletives than male speakers, which supports the assumption that women are prone to use more standard language than men (McEnery, 2005). Euphemisms can be seen as a form of self-censoring, where the speaker controls the intended use of an expletive in situations where such an utterance is deemed to be inappropriate.

### **1.3 The language of swearing**

Frequent swearers are often accused of having a poor and insufficient vocabulary. However, perhaps contrary to popular belief, the language of swearing is rich in diversity, and to a certain degree innovative in word choices and usage, and productive in derivation and compounding. A closer look at swearing from a grammatical point of view shows an aspect of language that has its own anatomy with distinctive syntactic and morphological patterns. A brief review of said patterns follows below.

#### **1.3.1 Word formation**

The syntactic and morphological patterns of swearing are outlined by Andersson and Hirsch (1985:1.35-49), using the following grammatical hierarchy over the different elements in which swearing can appear:

- 1, As separate utterances,
- 2, as “adsentences” ,
- 3, as major constituents of a sentence,
- 4, as part of a constituent of a sentence, or
- 5, as part of a word.

The first type of construction is very common, and includes for example expletives like “*shit!*, *fuck!*, *hell!*”, and abusives like “*you bastard!*, *you motherfucker!*”. Constructions within this category can be elaborated and varied endlessly; especially when it comes to abusive

swearing and name-calling, and most taboo-categories can appear here. In the second type, swearing expressions are loosely tied to a sentence, and occur as complements before or after ordinary grammatical sentences. These expressions serve several communicative functions, the primary one being to contribute to the expressive and evocative functions of the utterance. They can occur either in initial position, like in the example “*shit*, I forgot my keys!”, or final position, as in “shut up, *you bastard!*”. The third type of swearing expressions function as major constituents of a sentence; namely subject, object, or predicate. Most abusive expressions and name-calling can be used as subjects and objects, as in the two examples “*that bastard* doesn’t know anything” and “throw *that shit* away!”. Verbal functions are not common, but do occur, as in the examples “he *fucks up* everything!”.

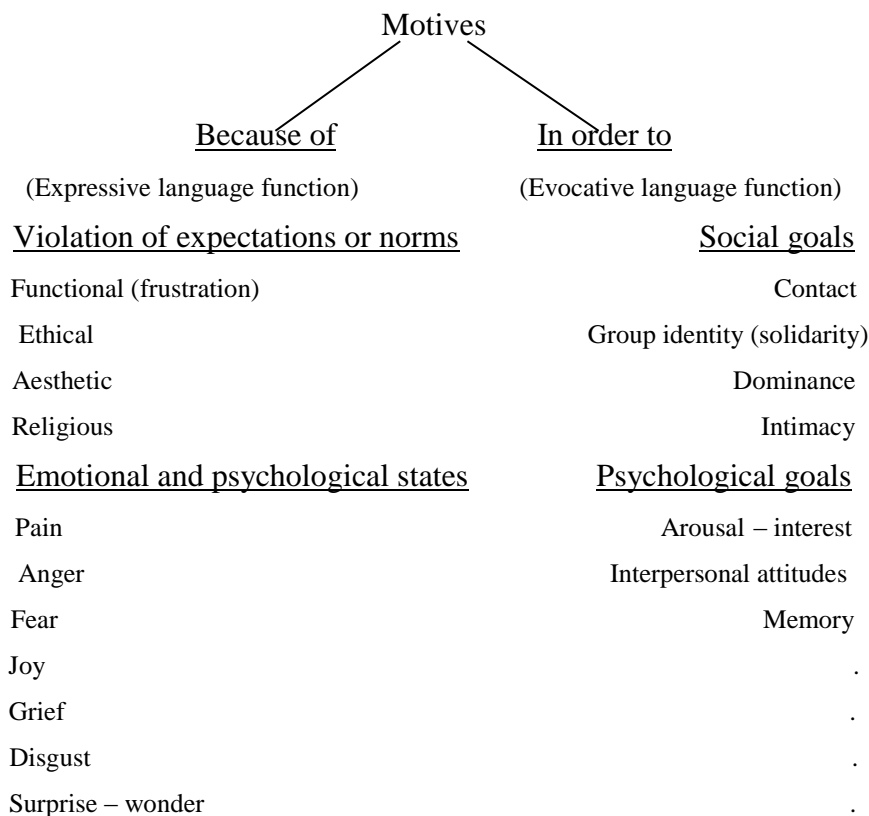
In the fourth group, swearing expressions function as modifying elements; like adjectival modification, adverbs of degree or modifying a question word. Here we find two other functions of the word *fucking*; as adjectival modification, which can be seen in the example “That *fucking* train is always late”, and as adverb of degree in constructions such as “We saw a *fucking* good film!”. A question word can also be modified by a swearing expression to add extra emphasis as in “Who *the hell* has taken my books? Expressions in the last level of the hierarchy include swearing elements that are combined with another word; occurring before the word as prefixes, inside the word as infixes or after the word as suffixes. Prefixing and suffixing are both common processes in productive word formation, which can be illustrated using the examples *shit* as in “*shitfaced*”, and *ass* as in *lame-ass*. Infixing a swearword is a more peculiar construction, which seems to be restricted to nouns, adjectives and adverbs, a representative example being “*abso-fucking-lutely!*”. This last group shows taboo items combined with non-taboo items creating compound swear words. Swear words can appear as solid compounds, where the different morphemes appear as one word, either morphed together or hyphenated. They can also appear as loose compounds, where the morphemes are not connected but still form a unit, either together with other swear words, or with non-taboo items where the association with taboo items create swearing expressions.

### 1.3.2 Motives for swearing

Andersson and Hirsch have (1985:1.6) listed two fundamental types of motives which could potentially elicit swearing behaviour; the first motive, ‘because of’, causes behaviour in a reactive sense, while in the second one, ‘in order to’, the behaviour is active and goal-oriented. Swearing in the reactive category can typically be classed as *expressive* language



use, while in the active category it is primarily *evocative* language use, however, there is some overlap between the two categories. The different motives have been summarized in the following figure (Andersson & Hirsch, 1985:1.8):



**Figure 1** – The different motives of swearing

### 1.3.3 Syntactic functions of swearing

Expletives used for the purpose of expressing irritation or surprise are very common emotional swearing functions. Expressions of this kind are not directed at anyone, but function as a commentary on the speaker's situation, and often take the form of exclamations that work independently as a separate utterance (Ljung, 2006:40-43). Swearing directed at someone else can be called invectives or abuse; such items include using unfriendly imperatives and expressions of dislike, directly addressing or mentioning somebody in a derogatory or pejorative way by using a taboo word which has lost its original meaning in the circumstances (Lindhe, 1994:12-24).

When used for the purpose of achieving a stylistic effect, swearwords are often markers of emphasis or expressions of negativity. However, the same words can be used for expressing the opposite sentiment, and some swearwords can be used both as general

expletives and as insults. This is clearly seen in Hughes (1992), where all informants reported that they used the same words differently when happy or annoyed, and that the same words could be considered “just words” in general conversation or be used in an abusive way. They also stress that they would be offended by a word only when it is used as abuse, and that they use the same words as terms of endearment as well as insults. Her conclusion from these results is that “...swearwords only become powerful when used *as* swearwords. In general, they are used as adjectives or for emphasis, in which case they lack power for the user” (Hughes, 1992:298).

Common swearing functions have been categorized by McEnery (2006:32), and can be seen in the model here below:

- Predicative negative adjective: ‘the film is **shit**’
- Adverbial booster: ‘**Fucking** marvellous’ ‘**Fucking** awful’
- Cursing expletive: ‘**Fuck** You!/Me!/Him!/it!’
- Destinal usage: ‘**Fuck** off!’ ‘He **fucked** off’
- Emphatic adverb/adjective: ‘He **fucking** did it’ ‘In the **fucking** car’
- Figurative extension of literal meaning: ‘to **fuck** about’
- General expletive: ‘(Oh) **Fuck!**’
- Idiomatic ‘set phrase’: ‘**fuck** all’ ‘give a **fuck**’
- Literal usage denoting taboo referent: ‘We **fucked**’
- Imagery based on literal meaning: ‘kick **shit** out of’
- Premodifying intensifying negative adjective: ‘the **fucking** idiot’
- ‘Pronominal’ form with undefined referent: ‘got **shit** to do’
- ‘Reclaimed’ usage – no negative intent, e.g. **Niggers/Niggaz** as used by African American rappers
- Religious oaths used for emphasis: ‘by God’

## 2. Theoretical framework and previous research

Swearing and using expletives is usually associated with breaking language rules, as most people would regard swearing as “bad language”. The common stereotype is that frequent swearing suggests that the speaker has an inadequate vocabulary, is uneducated, and belongs to the working class. However, sociolinguists view the use of expletives as a complex social phenomenon. McEnery points out that taboo language has gained its power through a process of stigmatisation, and the development of attitudes that lead to a society problematizing and making inferences about the users of such language (2006:1). Andersson and Trudgill argue that although sometimes people swear because they want to be offensive, insulting etcetera,

there is more to it than that, and that what is often referred to as “bad language” may only be so in certain contexts or in certain respects. These distinctions are closely tied to cultures and ideologies deciding and evaluating what is good and bad. The sort of swearing and the types of words that are used in a language can, therefore, tell us something about the beliefs and values of its speakers (1992:14).

## 2.1 Swearing and Identity

The concept of prestige is central to sociolinguistic analysis. Speech habits and language variations are assigned a positive or negative value, and this is in turn applied to the speaker. Through the different choices of speech acts, which can be subconscious or conscious, speakers show what groups in society they identify themselves with. RP English and accents like this have *overt prestige*; they are associated with social power, education and wealth, which explains why so many people strive to follow this language norm (Ljung, 2006:95). But the concept of prestige is far from uncomplicated. Language is an important part of group identification and solidarity and can also be an effective sign of difference, including or excluding people from a particular group. In this respect standard language forms might not always be the most valued in certain contexts. This seems to be especially true of working class vernacular, which has been studied by researchers such as Hudson and Newcastle-born Milroy, who have pointed to psychologist research showing that low prestige ethnic and social groups everywhere see their language as a powerful symbol of group identity, and that it is important for them to maintain this group identity, despite the social benefits that might be gained from adopting standardized code (Hughes, 1992:295). The use of standard language within these groups can even be seen as arrogant, snobbish and unnatural (Ljung, 1984:19).

Swearing is usually associated with very informal language or lower-class speakers. That swearing to a great extent is associated with working class speakers generally makes the usage of this kind of language outside of what is seen as appropriate (middle class) polite conversation, something that is regarded as negative and connected with low prestige. However, swearing can, in the right circumstances, be associated with positive values and earn the speaker a different kind of prestige. The term *covert prestige* was coined by Labov, and is an important notion in sociolinguistic analysis (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992:8). Trudgill has in his research found that many British middle class men, who do not have a natural working class pronunciation, often would claim to have it for the sake of seeming tough and strong: it has *covert prestige*. This is probably also true when it comes to the use of

expletives where informants might be prone to over-report their usage for the sake of gaining *covert prestige* (Ljung 2006:95). McEnery argues that swearing or “bad language words” can be considered markers of distinction, rather than simply markers of difference when discussing non-prestige forms of language, which can explain the frequent expletive usage in working-class vernacular (2005:29).

Earning *covert prestige* from frequent expletive usage is generally said to be more common among men, as this kind of language has often been associated with toughness, strength and manliness. However, some researchers have found that this concept might also be applicable for the expletive usage in young working-class females (Trudgill, 1972, in Hughes, 1992:295). Milroy noted that for many women within these groups “feminine” speech may not be an issue, and that the maintenance of class group identity, rather than adhering to so called “correct” female behaviour might be what is important to these women, and Hughes concludes that the women in her study are not breaking any language “rules” prescribing that women should use less slang and expletives than men, but that they are simply using their language and their norm, which appears to be previously unaccounted for in linguistic studies (1992: 300). Previous research has shown that, in contrast to traditional stereotypes on female speech, working class women swear more and use stronger swearwords than middleclass men. The variable of social class or group membership could, therefore, be seen as a significant determinant of swearing behaviour, more so than gender.

## **2.2 Gendered swearing**

The classic sociolinguistic pattern is the assumption that there are fundamental differences in the way men and women speak, and to highlight these differences in linguistic studies. The main differences that have previously been pointed out are that women are said to use more formal language and polite forms, and generally aim to come closer to a standard speech norm than men. These ideas have been reinforced by a number of influential linguists such as Trudgill (1974) and Lakoff (1975) (in Stapleton, 2003:22), and it has been concluded that women are more aware of the social impact that language has than men, and that they therefore adapt their speech by using more correct forms than men in their attempting to come close to standardized speech norms (Ljung, 2006:93). When it comes to expletive usage, the gender differences that have been emphasized have been that men use more, and stronger, more offensive, expletives than women, but that women use milder swear words with a higher frequency than the men. It has also been shown that both genders are more comfortable with

expletive usage in same-sex groups, but that men are more likely to swear in public than women (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008:274).

However, this traditional view has been criticized by feminist researchers, who see the classic sociolinguistic pattern, in which women are more polite in their speech than men, as an overgeneralization. The supposed differences between male and female speech are criticized for being stereotypical and not supported by empirical evidence. These critics stress that other factors, such as social networks, social status, age, and education influence female language use as much as they do male, and older linguistic research involving women is challenged for being biased, and that results obtained thereof have been distorted, since male forms are taken as norm and female forms as deviant, and that researchers have failed to support their hypotheses about sex differences in speech with reliable empirical results. The critics point out that it is the difference that is emphasized and that overlap is ignored, and that the characteristics attributed to women often tend to be overgeneralized, when they are only partially true. The descriptions of women's more frequent use of polite language are questioned for being prescriptive rather than descriptive, aiming to prescribe how women ought to talk, and the traditional assumption, that women and men differ in their use of swearwords and other taboo words, is criticized for the lack of firm evidence to confirm or deny this (Hughes, 1992, de Klerk, 1991, Stapleton, 2003).

Although this criticism is not very recent, studies attempting to show a more nuanced view on female speech and expletive usage have been few and infrequent. Naturally, such a study will encounter the same obstacles as other studies on the subject, for example that sufficient research material is hard to find. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions, all attempting to show a more complex picture of male and female speech, and to account for variables that might be more determining factors than simply the gender of the speaker. This research is presented briefly here below, starting from the oldest and moving onwards to the most recent among the found examples: de Klerk (1991) highlights the relationship between social power and expletive use. Based on the results from her study involving 160 adolescents she determines that the stereotypical expectations of non-swearing females are not upheld. She concludes that the hypothesis of expletive use being connected to social power seems to be correct, in that expletives are often condoned in males but condemned in females and that women are socialized into being less verbally aggressive and that they are therefore perceived as using linguistic behaviour that is weak and powerless. The variable of social class is explored by Hughes (1992), where she draws the conclusion that aspects such as class and economic situation, and not simply their sex, are defining factors for women's swearing and

use of strong expletives. For her informants, albeit a small group, swearing is an integral part of their everyday language. These women are proud of their swearing, but show a strong sense of morality in where and when it is appropriate to do this.

In more recent research, by for example Stapleton (2003), the relationship between gender and swearing has been suggested as being more complex and context-specific than has previously been supposed, and that women's expletive usage can in some ways be seen as a transgression of cultural stereotypes and expectations of femininity and a socially accepted means of constructing a masculine identity. Results of these studies have been that there is a noticeable difference in frequency of swearing, with men swearing slightly more than women. The previous notion of a gender difference in the strength of expletives used, however, has been refuted, as no significant difference of this kind has been recorded. Thelwall (2008) argues that there is a cultural difference between American and British swearers in terms of gendered swearing; According to his comprehensive research on Internet based social media pages (MySpace), women in the UK now use as many strong swear words as the men, while a clear difference between the sexes can still be seen in the USA. He argues that this could be indicative of a fundamental difference in gender roles and expectations between these two countries, and that this paradigmatic shift in the UK could be attributed to the growing so called "Ladette culture" there. As this subculture engages in binge drinking and gender reversal behaviour, this could potentially influence women to close in on language behaviour previously perceived as stereotypically male, including frequent expletive usage. However, it is not clear what kind of impact the liberating Internet effect might have had on these results.

### **3. Material**

To examine the use of swear words and expletives in modern spoken English, research material has been collected from the medium of reality television. These types of programs, with their various settings and subject matter, all have in common that they provide a source of unscripted dialogues (and often monologues) which are likely to come close to the genuine speech patterns of the speakers involved.

Reality television is a programme genre documenting unscripted situations and actual occurrences, often featuring a previously unknown cast and highlighting personal drama and conflict more than other unscripted television shows such as documentaries. The genre has a variety of standard tropes including "confessionals", where cast members express their thoughts, which are often used as the show's narration. Reality television began in the 1990's

and exploded as a phenomenon in the early 2000's. Today various global television channels are dedicated to the reality format, the most famous one being MTV - the former music video channel, which since the early 2000's mainly produces programs of the reality television genre. Many television channels in the United States use censure, or bleeping, on strong language subjects, and traditionally follow a list of banned words called "the Dirty Seven" (Seven dirty words 2013, Wikipedia [online]). MTV is a channel that does not use censoring or bleeping, which is a prerequisite for my research and the reason why programs from this channel have been used as material.

### **3.1 *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore***

In order to facilitate comparison between swearing in American and British English two programs mirroring each other have been chosen; the American original *Jersey Shore* and the English remake *Geordie Shore*. Both programs are known for exhibiting strong language and uninhibited behaviour in their cast members, which makes them suitable as materials for a study of swear words. The two reality shows have the same fundamental conditions and basic features: a group of people in their early twenties, four male and four female, previously unknown to each other, are placed in a house together and have to coexist peacefully for a limited amount of time (a month). Obstacles against this being possible is the clash of the various colourful personalities being cramped together under pressure and a constant and large amount of freely flowing alcoholic substances which tend to loosen the inhibitions of everybody involved. The viewed portion of the programs consists to a large extent of free activities and dialogue, mixed with a commentary of individual confessionals. However, there are also some prearranged activities in which the cast have to take part; for example the cast of *Jersey Shore* have to take turns to work shifts in a t-shirt store and the cast of *Geordie Shore* get chosen in pairs to complete different assignments for a promotions company. Apart from the regularly arranged situations, the members of the cast seem to be free to do what they want, as long as it is visible to the audience. As such, these two programs have a very free format, even compared to other shows in the reality genre.

*Jersey Shore*, created by SallyAnn Salsano, is the original programme and is situated in Seaside Heights in New Jersey, USA. Season one of this series was first broadcasted in 2009 and six seasons have been aired in total until the show was cancelled in 2012. The eight cast members are all Americans with Italian ancestry, which seems to play a significant role in their group identification. This is stereotypically a macho culture with an expected image for

the men to be very masculine in appearance and behaviour. *Geordie Shore* is set in the city of Newcastle in Northern England, whose inhabitants and dialect are traditionally nicknamed Geordie. The “shore” refers to the Tyne, the river on whose bank the city is built (Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, Wikipedia [online]). This is a typical working class city, and its inhabitants show a strong sense of solidarity and group identification within their local culture. The series started in 2011 taking after the American model, and the sixth season is currently being broadcasted. For the purpose of comparison between the American and the English version of the show, I have selected material from season three from *Jersey Shore* and season one from *Geordie Shore*, which coincide in time with each other (in 2011). A corpus consisting of six programs from either country has been collected as research material. Six programs constitute season one of *Geordie Shore* and therefore provided a natural delimitation to the material available. *Jersey Shore* has longer seasons (around 13 episodes), which is why episode one to episode six have been selected to match the *Geordie Shore* full season one. Each episode is approximately forty minutes in length (Jersey Shore/Geordie Shore 2013, TV.com and MTV US [online]). The *Jersey Shore* cast speak (to a larger or smaller degree) with an accent which is common to Americans with Italian roots, which includes linguistic features that differ slightly from General American, mainly in pronunciation, but also in occasional usage of non-standard grammatical forms and frequent use of slang expressions. The *Geordie* dialect is a strong Northern English accent which is very characteristic in its linguistic features and sometimes includes non-standard grammatical forms and vocabulary specific to the region. As my aim is only to investigate swearing and no other forms of non-standard language, I will only consider the potential implications this might have concerning expletive usage of the people included in this study. One such implication that could be relevant to this investigation is when it is hard to determine if a word should be counted as a swearword or a euphemism due to said word being spoken in a strong accent. Some variations of swearwords could be seen as either dialectal variation or euphemisms. I discuss this problem in more detail in section 4.8. Based on previous research, it is also likely that the people of both the investigated groups are influenced by their working class background and culture in their use of expletives, and that this could be a significant identity marker for both parties to show their membership and solidarity with their respective social groups or subcultures.



### **3.2 Data collection and Swear word selection**

Swear words found in dialogue and monologues of the selected six programs from each country of the two reality television series *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* have been excerpted. All encountered swear words matching the chosen principles for selection have been recorded in a table according to frequency of occurrence, word forms and variations, word class, if uttered by an American (*Jersey Shore*) or British (*Geordie Shore*) speaker, and a male or female speaker. Numbers have been checked and recounted both digitally and manually and the process has been repeated three times for all sums. The words have then been categorized according to the different taboo areas they belong to, and the most common situations in which they occur in the material. Solid compounds have been counted as one swear word, while loose compounds comprised of two different swear words have been counted as two words. Non-taboo elements in loose compounds or idiomatic expressions have not been counted into the sum.

A list of swear words was compiled from a combination of sources to be used as a basis in the selection process: the official British Broadcasting Corporation guidelines concerning offensive language (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, see Appendix), the unofficial list known as “The Dirty Seven”, corresponding to words that are excluded from American broadcast television (censoring enforced by the Federal Communications commission), and a small addition of known swear words and common word variants. As previously stated, words have to be used in a figurative sense to be classed as swear words (Crystal (2003), Ljung (2006), Andersson & Trudgill (1992)). All taboo words conveying a literal meaning found in the material, for example words referring to actual body parts or actions of a taboo nature (sexual, bodily functions) using taboo words in a literal sense, have therefore been excluded. Swear words only appearing once in the material have also been excluded from the result.

### **3.3 Reliability, validity and representativeness**

It is common to discuss the terms validity and reliability pertaining to empirical studies, namely if the results presented fulfil the aim of the study, and if it can be repeated by another researcher with the same results. For these reasons I have attempted to be as transparent as possible about the execution of this study and comprehensive in the presentation of the results thereof. Another relevant term for discussion is the representativeness of the study in question. This material represents the speech patterns of two specific groups during a certain period of time. I am well aware that based on the small material in this study, results cannot

be generalized to the greater population. However, it might show language variations from groups that are rarely included in linguistic studies, and it might also be possible to notice tendencies which could potentially be of a more general nature.

There are some potential obstacles when conducting academic studies on the subject of swearing, one that has been pointed out by Thelwall (2008:84) is the difficulty to collect a large corpus or material, as swear words are usually excluded from text. With the exception of the recent studies by McEnery and Xiao (2004) using The BNC corpus, previous research has mostly been done by method of interviewing a small number of people or on material collected from over-heard free speech of schoolchildren. Material collected from interviews has the problem of *Observer's paradox*, where speakers are compelled, with any level of transparency, to modify their behaviour as a result of the unnatural situation they find themselves in when being observed. This is likely to have an even stronger effect when it comes to swearing and different forms of taboo language, since we are all indoctrinated with how we should speak and what is standard and appropriate in different situations. The method of using questionnaires in collecting data has the implication that results depend on the limited extent to which you can trust a person's reports on their own behaviour, and these too are likely to be subject to a certain extent of modification when it comes to expletive usage. Thelwall (2008), the author of the most recent large-scale study on the subject, brings up the lack of abusive forms of swearing in his own research, as the MySpace pages he has analysed consist of personal testimonials and messages between invited friends only.

My research can show abusive forms of swearing and the swearing you might not as easily put into writing. Reality television with its unscripted form comes close to genuine speech patterns. In a sense the problem of the *Observer's paradox* might apply to this study, as the participants are obviously being observed and it is hard to determine to what degree they are adapting their speech for the benefit of the viewer or following instructions from the producers, since the details of how the shows are cut and constructed are not disclosed on any of the official websites. However, taking into account the large amount of swear words that occur in the shows and very little censure thereof, I judge the outside control on the cast members to mostly concern how scenes are cut, and consequently how the action therefore is being portrayed, and not in any significant way influencing their linguistic behavior. Furthermore, since this is an observation study on an existing material over which I as researcher have no influence, I deem my own role as an objective and detached observer.

## 4. Results

The results of the investigation into the swear words used in the two reality shows *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore*, are presented in the following order: Firstly, a list of the top ranking swear words in the material is presented and commented on. Secondly, it is shown how all the encountered swear words are distributed over the British and American speakers and over male and female speakers in the material. Thirdly, the encountered swear words are presented divided into their various taboo categories and word classes, or word class functions, and the most common situations in which they occur. Lastly a brief overview is given on the few instances of censoring of swear words found in the material, as well as euphemisms for swear words that the speakers occasionally use. These euphemisms are not included in the total swear words count.

### 4.1 Swear words – frequency and different types

41 different types of expletives are represented by 1202 tokens in this material. In table 1, the most commonly occurring swear words in the material, with over 10 instances, are listed in order of frequency (see Table 1: Appendix for the complete list). As stated in the principles of selection, only words appearing twice or more in the material have been included. The word *fuck* counts as several different lexemes in its different forms and is therefore presented in all recorded forms separately. A vast majority of the encountered swear words in the material are the different forms of the word *fuck*. The most common usage is in adjectival form, either as premodifying intensifying negative adjective, as seen in the example “the *fucking* idiot”, or emphatic adjectival filler, as in “in my *fucking* bed”. However, the form *fucking* is not used exclusively as a negative intensifier but is quite often used in positive contexts, as in the example “we’re like a *fucking* family”. The adverbial form of *fucking* ranks as a close second in the list, and typical usage here include forms where the word is used as emphatic filler, in a positive context as in the example “I *fucking* love you” or a negative one as in “I’m *fucking* sick of you”. Other common forms are when the word is used as an adverbial booster, either underlining a positive message as in the example “*fucking* awesome”, or a negative one as in “you’re *fucking* crazy”. The third form in the ranking order is *fuck* in noun form, where representative instances of usage include examples like “what the *fuck*?” and “I don’t give a *fuck*”. Number four in the list is *fuck* in verbal form, where typical usage often has the form of

a particle verb with destinal usage<sup>1</sup> as in “*fuck off*”, or as cursing expletives paired with personal pronouns like “*fuck you/me/him/them/it*”. The following expletive in the list is the noun form of *shit*, which is often used as a noun of vague reference, as in the example “I’m sick of this *shit*”, or prefaced with indefinite article *a-* becoming a synonym for nothing, as in “I don’t give a *shit!*”. Most of the words at the bottom of the list belong to the category of abuse, however *bitch* can be found high in the list due to the word being common both as an insult and in a reclaimed sense.

**Table 1: Swear words overview**

The 14 most common individual expletives are here ranked according to frequency:

Expletive	Number of tokens
1. Fucking adj.	236
2. Fucking adv.	220
3. Fuck n.	117
4. Fuck v.	116
5. Shit n.	88
6. Bitch	82
7. God	49
8. Shit interj.	45
9. Fucked	30
10. Hell	29
11. Shit/-ty	21
12. Fuck interj.	19
13. Ass	13
14. Piss n.	11

## 4.2 Comparison between nationalities and sexes

Table 2 shows how the 41 different types of expletives found in the material are distributed between British and American swearers and male and female swearers. The first column marked “UK”, shows all swear words found in *Geordie Shore*, the second column, marked “US”, shows all swear words found in *Jersey Shore*. The last two columns, marked “male” and “female”, show a collective score for both shows but all swear words uttered by a male or female speaker presented separately in their respective columns. There is a noticeable difference in usage between the two different nationalities, more so than between the two sexes. This can be seen on many levels; firstly, in what swearwords are used, where there are some words that are only used in one of the countries and not the other. A slight majority of these country-specific words are used by the British speakers, including *arsed*, *bastard*,

<sup>1</sup> I use the definition from McEnery’s model (p. 10), when referring to these phrasal verbs.

*dickhead*, *piss n.*, *prick*, *slag*, *slut*, *twat* and *wanker*, while the words *asshole*, *Christ*, *cunt*, *damn*, *fucker*, *jerk-off*, *motherfucker* and *whore* are uttered exclusively by American speakers. Some words are used exclusively by either a male or female speaker, where the female speakers are alone in using several derogatory forms traditionally used for a man; *dickhead*, *fucker*, *jerk-off* and *prick*, but also some derogatory forms which are traditionally used for a woman, like *slut*, *twat* and *whore*. Only *Christ* is used exclusively by a male speaker. Overall there seems to be little difference in how often the women and men in the material swear, and how strong swear words they use.

Secondly, there is a difference in how swear words are used between the two nationalities in the material. For example, there is not much difference in how often British and American speakers use *fuck* in noun form (64/53) or verbal form (61/55), however, the British speakers commonly use *fuck* as an indefinite noun, as in the expressions “I don’t give a *fuck*”, while the American speakers more often use this word as a definite noun, as in “what the *fuck*” and “get the *fuck* out”. In verbal form the British speakers choose expressions with destination usage, as in “*fuck* off”, while the American speakers more commonly choose cursing expletives like “*fuck* you”.

Lastly, there seems to be a difference in the apparent level of insult swear words cause when directed at somebody. Then same words seem to have a different impact depending on which country you live in or if the word is spoken by a male or female speaker. Derogatory terms in a reclaimed sense are to a greater extent used by the American speakers, and these words are used almost exclusively by female speakers. The example *bitch* is the most common, and ranks rather high in the list of used expletives, but it is used in almost equal measures as an insult and as a term of endearment. Naturally this word scores higher in the female column, as primarily women can use it in the reclaimed sense. Other words that are used both as abuse and in a reclaimed sense or terms of endearment include *whore*, *slut*, *motherfucker* and *asshole*, where the first two are mainly used in this way by female speakers, and the last two are exclusively used by men as terms of endearment. The word scoring the highest in the British Broadcasting ranking order of strong swearwords (see list in Appendix) is *cunt*. As this word is never heard in *Geordie Shore* it can be presumed to have been censored in this show. The word *cunt* seems to have the strongest impact even in the American show, where it appears 9 times as an insult, but never as a term of endearment.

**Table 2: Comparative overview**

The 14 most common expletives listed according to swearers' nationality and gender:

<b>Expletive</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
1. Fucking adj.	118	118	122	114
2. Fucking adv.	102	118	93	127
3. Fuck n.	64	53	52	65
4. Fuck v.	61	55	54	62
5. Shit n.	25	63	50	38
6. Bitch	9	73	14	68
7. God	13	36	12	37
8. Shit interj.	27	18	14	31
9. Fucked	3	27	11	19
10. Hell	18	11	18	11
11. Shit/-ty adj.	8	13	11	10
12. Fuck interj.	12	7	15	4
13. Ass	1	12	3	10
14. Piss n.	11	0	8	3

### 4.3 Taboo areas

Here follows a presentation on the taboo categories<sup>2</sup> encountered in the examined material. It is not always clear cut in which category expletives belong since some idiomatic expressions or (loose) compound swear words belong to two different categories as in the examples “*Holy shit*”(religion and excretion), and “*fucking Hell*” (sexuality and religion). The numbers of types and tokens within each taboo area are presented in alphabetical order to simplify reading:

<sup>2</sup> Categories are partly adapted from Lindhe (1994).

**Table 3: Sexuality**

Expletive	Number of tokens
Arsed	4
Ass	13
Asshole	6
Balls	5
Bastard	3
Bitch	82
Bitching	3
Cunt	9
Dick	8
Dickhead	4
Fuck n.	117
Fuck v.	116
Fuck interj.	19
Fucked	30
Fucker	3
Fucking adj.	236
Fucking adv.	220
Fucking v.	3
Jerk-off	6
Motherfucker	2
Prick	4
Pussy	2
Slag	5
Slut	3
Twat	2
Wanker	3
Whore	7

There are 27 types of sexual expletives with 915 tokens in this material. This is the most common of the taboo areas represented in the material, both counted in types and tokens. The word *fuck* in its different forms makes up a very large portion, and this is the only word that is used in many different expressions and functions. Most of the remaining expletives belong in the category of abuse, of which a small number (*bitch*, *slut*, *whore*, and *motherfucker*) also appear in a reclaimed sense with no negative intent or as terms of endearment.

**Table 4:** Excretion, bodily functions and filth

Expletive	Number of tokens
Bullshit	8
Piss n.	11
Piss v.	7
Pissed	5
Pissing	2
Shit n.	88
Shit interj.	45
Shit/-ty adj.	21
Shitting	9

There are 9 types represented by 196 tokens. These words are rarely used with a positive meaning, but are all of a negative character as expletives. A possible exception is *shit* in the form of an interjection, which is occasionally used in expressions of positive surprise.

**Table 5:** Religion

Expletive	Number of tokens
Christ	2
Damn	7
God	49
Hell	29
Jesus	4

5 types of religious expletives are represented by 91 tokens in this material. This is by far the least occurring category in the examined material. The word *God* however, is used rather frequently, usually in exclamations like “Oh my *God!*”, and in situations having to do with some kind of shock or surprise. *Hell* is also ranking high due to its frequent use as a compound expletive paired with *fucking*, as in “*fucking hell*”.

#### 4.4 Word classes

The different word classes in which expletives in this material occur are listed below, and the expletives within each word class are presented with a few representative instances. It is not always clear whether a word form should be counted into one word class or another, which is why I use both the definitions word class and word class function to categorize the expletives.



**Table 6:** Nouns/ Nominal functions

Expletive	Number of tokens
Ass	13
Asshole	6
Balls	5
Bastard	3
Bitch	82
Bullshit	8
Christ	2
Cunt	9
Dick	8
Dickhead	4
Fuck n.	117
Fucker	3
God	49
Hell	29
Jerk-off	6
Jesus	4
Motherfucker	2
Piss n.	11
Prick	4
Pussy	2
Shit n.	88
Slag	5
Slut	3
Twat	2
Wanker	3
Whore	7

This is by far the largest category in terms of different types, which could be explained by the fact that most derogatory terms are found in this word class. Due to this abundance in variation, most abusive terms do not score very high, with the exception of words which have a reclaimed usage (*bitch* being the most common). Other forms include expletives occurring in expressions like “I don’t give a *fuck/shit*”, and “are you taking the *piss*?”. In this material there are 26 different nouns with 475 tokens. They are as follows in alphabetical order:

**Table 7: Verbs/Verbal function**

<b>Expletive</b>	<b>Number of tokens</b>
Arsed	4
Bitching	3
Damn	7
Fuck v.	116
Fucked	30
Fucking v.	3
Piss v.	7
Pissed	5
Pissing	2
Shitting	9

These 10 types of words with verbal function have been found in the material and there are 186 tokens. A majority of these are cursing expletives paired with personal pronouns, as seen in the expressions “*fuck* you/me/him/them/it”, and particle verbs as in the examples “*fuck off*”, “*piss off*”, “*fucked up*”, and “you’re *fuck*ing with my head”.

### **Adjectives/Adjectival function**

Only 2 different adjectives occur in the material: *Fucking* (236) and *Shit/-ty* (21) represented by 257 tokens. *Shit* and *shitty* have been counted together, since *shitty* would probably be the grammatically correct form when used as an adjective. However, there are a few instances in the material where the form *shit* is used instead, as in the examples “I’ve had a *shit* day” and “we had a *shit* time”. Occasionally *shit* is also used as a predicative negative adjective, as in “this is *shit*”.

### **Adverbs/Adverbial function**

There are 220 instances of adverbs in the material, but only 1 type, *fuck*ing, is represented. The swear words used as adverbs most commonly have the function of emphatic fillers or adverbial boosters, as previously stated, and a representative example here would be “are you *fuck*ing kidding me?”.

### **Interjections**

In this category all swear words used in syntactic isolation have been listed. There are 6 different types of interjections occurring in the material; *Christ!*, *fuck!*, *God!*, *Hell!*, *Jesus!*, and *shit!*. In these cases the swear words are always used as general expletives and exclamations. However, only the most common interjections *fuck* and *shit* have been counted

as separate tokens (and have been presented with their own headings in the tables above), while the rest of these expletives have been counted into the word class nouns, although depending on usage (expression of sudden emotion, occurring in syntactic isolation) they sometimes belong to this category. As an example *Hell*, as a loose compound with *fucking* (*fucking hell!*), is a commonly occurring interjection, but as loose compounds are counted as separate parts, this expression has been counted as a noun modified by an adjective.

## 4.6 Situations

Expletives usually occur in certain situations, which have been categorized by Andersson and Hirsch (1985:1.14-34). Following this categorization, the most common situations that give rise to swearing in the examined material are: “Indignation, contempt, showing disgust for someone”, with 224 recorded instances; “Surprise” (neutral, joyful or fearful), with a combined sum of 140 items; “Psychic pain-disappointment-anger-frustration-irritation”, with 132 instances recorded; “Quieting someone”, represented by 52 instances ; “Appreciation, wonder, praise, endearment” and “Rejection- disapproval”, which both have 49 instances; “Defensive attitude: fear- anger”, which represents 45 instances; “Threatening someone”, with 44 recorded instances; and “Encouraging someone to do something”, which has 37 items. I refrain from giving excerpts from dialogue since it is difficult to see the difference between the examples when taken out of context.

In general there is little difference in what swear words are used in which situations, as most words seem to be flexible and can be used in many different ways depending on the context. The meanings of the words have to be inferred from the overall context or interpreted from paralinguistic cues such as intonation, body posture, gestures, and facial expressions. The only noticeable exception is that religious expletives are more common in situations of surprise, both as joyful exclamations and as a kind of appeal to higher powers in fearful situations; for “help” during the occurrence or expressing thankful relief when it is over. The most common situation when expletives are uttered in this material, “Indignation, contempt, showing disgust for someone”, also has the most variation in swear words used, most of them belonging in the insult and abuse category.

## 4.7 Censoring

There are 15 instances of bleeping in the material. 6 of these occur in *Jersey Shore* and the remaining 9 in *Geordie shore*. There is a male speaker in 7 and a female speaker in 2 of the

instances in *Geordie shore*. In *Jersey shore* the number is evenly distributed between the sexes, with 3 instances each. The few examples of bleeping encountered in the material will be illustrated with an example or extract from the surrounding dialogue (the first number in brackets refers to a male speaker, and the second one refers to a female speaker):

The 9 instances where a word is bleeped from the British show are seen in these examples, all except one occur in heated arguments:

A little daft \*bleep\* (1-0, GS 1:6); The daft \*bleep\* (0-1, GS 1:3); Daft \*bleep\* (2-0, GS 1:6); Daft fucking \*bleep\* (1-0, GS 1:5); Fucking daft \*bleep\* (1-0, GS 1:2); Two faced \*bleep\* (1-0, GS 1:6); Fucking two faced \*bleep\* (1-0, GS 1:6); Your fucking hard \*bleep\* (0-1, GS 1:6).

The 6 instances of censoring by bleeping in the American show occur in the following examples. In all these cases even the subtitles contain bleeping with \*\*\* and initial and final letter. All instances seem to be concerning graphic sexual imagery:

Eat \*bleep\* (1-0, JS 3:5), (He said you/I never said I) wanted to l-\*bleep\* his a-\*bleep\* (2-2, JS 3:5) (written as l\*\*k a\*\*\*\*\*e in the subtitles); \*bleep\*vag-\*bleep\* (0-1, JS 3:4).

## 4.8 Euphemisms

On some rare occasions in the material a euphemism is used instead of a swear word. These have not been included in the total sum of swear words, but should still be mentioned briefly as they can be seen as representatives for stronger swear words. It can sometimes be difficult to determine if a word should be counted as a euphemism or as a dialectal version of the actual swear word. For example there are some instances in *Geordie Shore* where a speaker utters words sounding like *feck*, *fecking* and *shite*. In these cases the words have been counted as *fuck*, *fucking* and *shit*, as the above mentioned forms come close to the Irish English pronunciation of these words. The words that have been determined as being euphemisms for swear words in this material are: *Frick*, *fricking*, *Gosh* and *Cricket*, which probably stand for *fuck*, *fucking*, *God* and *Christ*. However, these forms are so rare in the material that all words appear only once, except for *fricking*, which appears 6 times. All euphemisms occur in *Jersey Shore* and are uttered by female speakers.

## 5. Discussion

As being warned in the intro of each program, all episodes of both *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* contain strong language to a very high degree. Swear words apparently constitute a big part of these people's vocabulary and have multiple functions that vary from neutral language fillers and positive or negative emphasizees to aggressive and abusive language with the option of a certain degree of reclaimed usage, where the same words are used both as insults and as terms of endearment. Previous research has often underlined the main function of expletives as being used for expressing irritation and negativity, but in this material I find that they are very often used in clearly positive contexts. This shows that the words themselves are not denoting any one meaning, but are flexible and have potential to be used in a variety of contexts. In other cases swear words do not really seem to mean anything at all, but are used with a similar function as small words and conversational fillers (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992:18). These findings point to a form of usage verging on routine where, as in Hughes' study (1992), swear words seem to lack power when used in for example adjectival form. In these cases the swear words take on the form which Ljung (1984:21) describes as "word class marker" before (most commonly) a noun, but have ceased to signify something more than that.

### 5.1 Word choices and their characteristics

The swear words selected (invectives not included) seem to move towards becoming more homogenous, based on the results where *fuck* and *fucking* appear to have replaced variants that have previously been very common (such as *bloody* in British English, which only appeared once in the whole material). Still, this is not surprising as many researchers (Andersson & Trudgill (1992), Andersson & Hirsch (1985), and Ljung (1984, 2006)) have pointed out the expletive *fuck* as the most common swear word in both British and American English, and the fact that it has spread enormously even outside the English-speaking world. McEnery (2005) attempts to explain the ruling position of the word *fuck* in modern day English with it being a very versatile swear word that can be used in a wide variety of ways and placed in several different word classes. This is a description that fits well with the results of the present study, where *fuck* appears in very many forms and functions. Another versatile swear word that ranks high in the list is *shit*. This word usually signifies something negative, as a synonym for "bad" in adjectival form, but as a noun of vague reference this can also be a synonym for either "stuff/things", "behavior/circumstance" or "anything/nothing".

Some swear words can have both positive and negative connotations depending on the tone with which they are delivered (*fuck, fucking, shit, God, Hell*), while others are purely used to convey a negative message (*piss, damn, bullshit* and most invectives). The words can also come across as varying in strength depending on the tone, relationship between the speakers and the situation in which they are uttered. In some expressions the swear words that can be used are interchangeable, an example being the expression “I don’t give a *fuck/shit/damn/rat’s ass*”. Sexual swear words are overrepresented in this material overall, and are clearly dominating in all categories from emotive swearing and abuse to emphatic fillers. *Cunt* is described as the strongest taboo word in English (Ljung, 2006:109), and this description seems to be confirmed by the results of this study, where this word is only used as abuse and is presumably censored in *Geordie Shore*. The usage of religious swear words appears, on basis of the results of this investigation, to be decreasing, and these words also come across as very mild on a comparative scale. However, religious expletives are still the most common in situations of fear and relief, where expletives are usually reactive, emotional and intuitive, and as such they are mostly interjections.

## **5.2 Similarities and Differences between the American and British speakers**

Both the British and the American speakers included in this investigation swear very frequently and use strong swear words, and swearing is clearly a large part of the vocabulary for both groups. These people also seem to have a strong sense of belonging to a group, where a specific image has to be maintained and a certain way of expressing yourself might be seen as mandatory. It can, therefore, be assumed that the swearing behaviour exhibited in these people is both accepted in, and expected from, the group of which they consider themselves to be members, and that this kind of expletive usage earns the speaker a portion of *covert prestige* (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992:8). This seems to be true for both male and female speakers in the material. The frequent usage of the word *fuck*, where it might have lost its power as an expletive, serves instead as a significant marker of distinction for the vernacular of both these groups.

Although the swearing frequency is similar in the British and American speakers in this study, there is a noticeable difference in the swear words and forms used. An interesting example is the word *piss*, which has both different functions and meanings for the two groups. The British speakers use expressions like “*piss off*”, “we’re getting *pissed*” and “are you taking the *piss*”, where the word in question stands for, respectively: an imperative for

someone to go away, getting drunk, and teasing somebody. The Americans, on the other hand, only use this word in expressions such as “you  *piss*  me off” and “I’m  *pissed*  at him”, where the meaning is always synonymous with angry. Derogatory terms in a reclaimed sense are more common among the American speakers, and among females, and  *bitch*  is the most common example. However, British speakers of both genders frequently use directional phrasal verbs “ *fuck*  off” and “ *piss*  off”, both in aggressive terms and in a cordial way, while these forms are never used by the American speakers.

### 5.3 Gendered swearing

Contrary to the traditional stereotypes of male versus female speech, there is no noteworthy difference in either frequency or strength in expletives used between male and female speakers in this material. If anything can be concluded from the results, the women in this study swear more, and often use stronger swear words, than their male counterparts. A possible factor that should be considered is that the women in the material appear to speak more in general than the men, which could potentially affect the results. However, this is a rough estimate which has not been accurately determined by timing the speakers, so this reason is merely speculative. One plausible explanation is that the women in this study seek to assert themselves and their position in the group by using strong language. Contrary to the common descriptions of women being more prone to using what de Klerk calls “powerless” language (1991:156), these women use high-intensity and aggressive speech styles which are usually associated with powerful language, and are most often described as stereotypically masculine. The frequent expletive usage might as such be seen as a matter of self-promotion and breaking of a social taboo (Stapleton, 2003:22).

Another reason might have to do with the composition of the groups. Both genders have been known to swear more in same-sex groups than in mixed-sex company, and men are known to use softer swear words in the presence of women (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008:274). It might be that the men in this study adjust their expletive usage for the benefit of the women in the group, as tradition commands, while the female speakers do not make any such considerations. However, the fact that the groups are mixed-sex does not seem to deter either party from swearing to any great extent, judging from the large amount of expletives encountered in the material, and there appears to be no significant difference whether a male or female person is addressed in the strength of swear words used. If anything, there seems to be a tendency for female speakers to use strong derogatory terms for other females, while the

male speakers rarely used the strongest swear words relating to women. A likely explanation could also be that the people in this material all belong to the working class, a group whose linguistic features have been studied rather frequently in the past, and which is often distinguished against other speech styles for the frequent use of strong language.

Nevertheless, the women of this group have often been overlooked in past studies and results have been generalized based on male speech or assumed to be in a certain way that has been supported with very little empiric evidence. The results of this study seem to be in agreement with those of researchers such as Hughes (1992) on working class women, where it seems that the speech styles presented in these programs are not too far divorced from the natural informal speech, including frequent expletive usage, which you might expect from this group.

## 5.4 Bleeps and Censorship

Among all the instances of heavy swearing it is interesting to see when euphemisms and bleeping do occur and what words are being censored. My findings are that there is a noticeable difference in the British and the American shows. You can surmise from the context, and the otherwise overall lack of the word, that the one censored word in the British version is *cunt*, whereas this word occurs rather frequently in the American material. However, the American show also has a few instances of bleeping, which I surmise has more to do with the graphic and taboo nature of the subject than the actual words used (probably *lick* and *asshole*), since the same words are used frequently throughout the material without being bleeped (*lick* is clearly not a swear word but is probably censored anyway due to the context). In reality, these attempts at censoring are not so effective, as it is possible to lip-read and be able to determine what the missing word is.

Using euphemisms can be seen as a form of self-censoring, but this is something that very seldom occurs in the material. If any conclusions can be drawn from the small amount of data, it would be that the female speakers use more euphemisms, that the American speakers use more than the British speakers, and that the situations in which euphemisms for swearwords are most common is when the speaker has more time to think about what is being said, i.e. they are not so spontaneous and/or emotional as the actual swear words. Euphemisms are used more frequently in non-loaded situations, where the speaker is self-correcting his or her language and can refrain more easily from using strong expletives. The recorded euphemisms often occur in the confessionals, and it can therefore be assumed that



the speakers think more about what they say in these situations, as it is so obvious that they are being watched and talking to an audience. This makes it a more formal situation, and some of the speakers therefore react with using slightly more formal speech, which includes substituting swear words for a milder form, a euphemism.

## 6. Conclusion

In this essay an attempt was made to investigate the expletive usage in two reality television shows from a sociolinguistic point of view, taking into account the effect that variables such as nationality and gender might have on the expletive usage in the examined material. An overview of all encountered expletives in the material has been given, and the collected data has been presented in different categories, including taboo areas, word classes or word class functions, and the most common situations in which swear words occur. As the examined group of people is small, this study makes no claims on how the results can be generalized to the greater public. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable tendency that is in accordance with previous researchers such as Thelwall (2008) and McEnery (2005), which is that the British women swear as much and choose as strong swear words as the men. In addition to this, the results of the present investigation indicate that the previous statement is also true for the American women in the material. If these results could be explained by these women being part of a social group that has rarely been seen in previous research, or if they point to female swearing behaviour evolving with passing time and changes in society, remains to be determined. As this study is limited in its volume and time, any further investigations on this subject were beyond the scope of this essay. I would therefore like to point to some suggestions of areas where further research would be beneficial:

- A deeper investigation into the subject of gender and swearing on a large-scale research material where more sociocultural variables are represented could provide more conclusive evidence of the seemingly evolving nature of female speech, and make an attempt to settle accounts with the past where outdated notions and stereotypes are concerned.
- The most common expletive in this study is *fucking* used as emphatic filler. Further investigations into the usage of this word could determine if it has begun to move past the point where it can be defined as an expletive, since it has seemingly begun to take on such a different linguistic function that another term might be more appropriate.

- The reality programs in this investigation seem to be of a new breed in the reality genre, and non-scripted and little directed programmes such as these would lend themselves well as objects for a more comprehensive study, both in terms of a gender perspective and from a linguistic point of view.
- I have only briefly touched upon aspects such as the role language plays in the process of identity formation, covert prestige, and image and expectations relating to typically macho cultures and for female members of the working class, but these areas would be interesting topics that deserve further examination.
- The various situations that give rise to swearing would also benefit from a more detailed study, as such an investigation was too comprehensive for the limited space of this essay.

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## 8. Appendix

**Table 1:** All individual expletives are here ranked according to frequency:

Expletive	Number of tokens
1. Fucking adj.	236
2. Fucking adv.	220
3. Fuck n.	117
4. Fuck v.	116
5. Shit n.	88
6. Bitch	82
7. God	49
8. Shit interj.	45
9. Fucked	30
10. Hell	29
11. Shit/-ty	21
12. Fuck interj.	19
13. Ass	13
14. Piss n.	11
15. Cunt	9
16. Shitting	9
17. Dick	8
18. Bullshit	8
19. Damn	7
20. Piss v.	7
21. Whore	7
22. Asshole	6
23. Jerk-off	6
24. Balls	5
25. Pissed	5
26. Slag	5
27. Arsed	4
28. Dickhead	4
29. Jesus	4
30. Prick	4
31. Bastard	3
32. Bitching	3
33. Fucker	3
34. Fucking v.	3
35. Slut	3
36. Wanker	3
37. Christ	2
38. Motherfucker	2
39. Pissing	2
40. Pussy	2
41. Twat	2

**Table 2:** Expletives according to swearers' nationality and gender are here listed in alphabetical order:

<b>Expletive</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Arsed	4	0	2	2
Ass	1	12	3	10
Asshole	0	6	3	3
Balls	1	4	2	3
Bastard	3	0	1	2
Bitch	9	73	14	68
Bitching	2	1	2	1
Bullshit	1	7	5	3
Christ	0	2	2	0
Cunt	0	9	1	8
Damn	0	7	6	1
Dick	4	4	4	4
Dickhead	4	0	0	4
Fuck n.	64	53	52	65
Fuck v.	61	55	54	62
Fuck interj.	12	7	15	4
Fucked	3	27	11	19
Fucker	0	3	0	3
Fucking adj.	118	118	122	114
Fucking adv.	102	118	93	127
Fucking v.	1	2	2	1
God	13	36	12	37
Hell	19	11	18	11
Jerk-off	0	6	0	6
Jesus	2	2	2	2
Motherfucker	0	2	1	1
Piss n.	11	0	8	3
Piss v.	4	3	6	1
Pissed	3	2	4	1
Pissing	1	1	0	2
Prick	4	0	0	4
Pussy	1	1	1	1
Shit n.	25	63	50	38
Shit interj.	27	18	14	31
Shit/-ty adj.	8	13	11	10
Shitting	3	6	1	8
Slag	5	0	3	2
Slut	3	0	0	3
Twat	2	0	0	2
Wanker	3	0	2	1
Whore	0	7	0	7

BBC wordlist strong swearword ranking order:

Cunt
Motherfucker
Fuck
Wanker
Nigger
Bastard
Prick
Bollocks
Arsehole
Paki
Shag
Whore
Twat
Piss off
Spastic
Slag
Shit
Dickhead
Pissed off
Arse
Bugger
Balls
Jew
Sodding
Jesus Christ
Crap
Bloody
God

The “Dirty Seven” original list of words:

Shit
Piss
Fuck
Cunt
Cocksucker
Motherfucker
Tits